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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 8239  
INFO RUEHZK/ECOWAS COLLECTIVE  
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RUEHRL/AMEMBASSY BERLIN 0540  
RUEHDO/AMEMBASSY DOHA 0462  
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON 0525  
RUEHMD/AMEMBASSY MADRID 2067  
RUEHFR/AMEMBASSY PARIS 0872  
RUEHPG/AMEMBASSY PRAGUE 0100  
RHMFISS/HQ USAFRICOM STUTTGART GE  
RUEHBS/USEU BRUSSELS  
RUEHDS/USMISSION USAU ADDIS ABABA  
RHMFISS/COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE  
RUCNDT/USMISSION USUN NEW YORK 0981

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 NOUAKCHOTT 000211

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/17/2019

TAGS: [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [MR](#)

SUBJECT: PRESS CRACKDOWN: JOURNALIST ARRESTED, WEBSITE  
BLOCKED, PROTESTERS TEARGASSED

REF: A. 2008 NOUAKCHOTT 759

[1](#)B. 2008 NOUAKCHOTT 758

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires Dennis Hankins for reasons 1.4 (b) and  
(d).

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: On the night of March 15th, Mauritanian police arrested Abbass Ould Braham, University English Teacher and editor of the tri-lingual on-line newspaper Taquadoumy while he sat in a restaurant among friends. On March 16th, General Prosecutor Seyid Ould Ghaliani ordered Mauritania's two main internet providers, Chinguitel and Mauritel to block the Taquadoumy website. Later that day, a peaceful sit-in protest in support of Abbass was dispersed with tear gas. This first case in recent history of Mauritanian authorities blocking access to a Mauritanian news website does not portend well for the future of civil liberties until the slated junta-sponsored June elections. This case in a milieu of severely eroding press liberties since the August 6th coup, shows just how jumpy and nervous coup leaders are on the eve of elections (REF A and B). International and domestic protest forced the regime to release Ould Braham on March 18 and unblock the website.

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Coups Critique  
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[1](#)2. (U) Taquadoumy is among Mauritania's most-popular internet news sources; purported by some to be the number one most visited and best quality site. According to an interview with the editor Abbass in February 2009 the Arabic site has 27,000 hits a day, next only to rivals Akhbar and Sahara. Taquadoumy also has a French site boasting 6,000 hits a day and an English site visited 600 times per day. Last week, Abbass authored and posted a series of articles under the Arabic title: "Deep Into Mauritania: A Study of the New Mauritanian Political Regime." These and other articles he published recently have been critical of General Aziz, certain military units and commanders.

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Junta's Justification  
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[1](#)3. (SBU) During a press conference and in a circulated press statement Mauritania's General Prosecutor attributed Abbass' arrest to defamation and intent to destabilize the

country. (Comment: There has been much discussion in local and international press about the junta's desire to close all websites hostile to the regime, and their payment to certain websites, notably CRIDEM, for publishing pro-coup propaganda).

¶4. (U) The day after the departure of Libyan mediator Colonel Gadhafi on March 12th 2009, the Minister of Communication and Parliamentary Relations, El Kory Ould Abdel Mola, peppered a press conference with veiled threats to all of those jeopardizing national security and stability. Intoning that the 'rectification movement' was carried out precisely to protect liberty, honesty and transparency, he said that the HCE (military junta) would fight to protect a secure environment that reinforces individual and collective liberties. In the conference he noted ominously that "no one would destabilize the country."

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Not the first time  
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¶5. (C) In November 2008, two anti-coup Mauritanian websites, Anbaa and Sahara media were hacked for publishing information deemed defamatory to the junta (REF B). Like many other journalists, during a meeting with PAO on February 5th, Abbass claimed to receive frequent telephone threats that he stop writing articles against the coup, and that if he continued the website would be hacked. In a private meeting with Abbass, he said that in December 2008, he published an article on a drunken driving accident of coup

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leader General Aziz's son. Shortly after he received an anonymous phone call ordering him to remove the article and he complied.

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Solidarity with Abbass  
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¶6. (U) In protest of his arrest, journalists and political party leaders assembled in front of the United Nations headquarters in Nouakchott on the afternoon of March 16th. Minutes later, the crowd of approximately 50 was dispersed with teargas. (Comment: The protest was covered widely in national French and Arabic sources as well as Al-Jazeera international news on March 16th). Those who assembled to support Abbass included fellow journalists and several anti-coup coalition FNDD party spokesmen. Within hours of his arrest, Abbass supporters set-up a Facebook group, entitled "Free Abbass Braham." The group has a photograph of Abbass with vertical black lines representing bars marring the portrait and is emblazoned with the English "Free Abbass." In less than two days, this Facebook group attracted over 280 members. Abbass supporters are also said to have created alternate methods of accessing the Taqadoumy site, much like Sahara media during its November 2008 hacking (REF B).

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Conditions of Arrest  
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¶7. (C) Post initially received information on March 17th through journalists that Abbass had not eaten since his arrest and was being kept in spartan conditions in the Ksar 2 prison. (Comment: Mauritanian law enforcement does not commonly provide food or comforts of any sort). On March 18th Post received word that Abbass had called his mother the evening prior and informed her that he is being well treated, has a television and paper on which to write.

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Junta's Response; Abdallahi's Democratic Riposte  
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¶8. (U) On the afternoon of March 17th 2009, Counselor to the President, Mohamed Ould Abdarrahoume Ould Moine held a press conference hailing the Libyan mediation and calling on all Mauritanian political partners to stop hostile press campaigns. In response to a question on Abbass' arrest, Moine labeled it "regrettable" but explained that the blocking was a "judicial decision" that would be examined, and reiterated his commitment to enforcing "public liberties." Concerning the teargas used to disperse Abbass supporters the day before, he urged protesters to "respect laws and regulations for demonstrating." To counter this, in a press release later that day, President Abdallahi's spokesman firmly condemned the actions of the junta and threw his full support behind freedom of the press, "an essential pillar of democracy that the putchists are trying to destroy." He called on all "democratic forces to come together to preserve the liberties that had been gained during the democratic era."

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Free at last?  
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¶9. (C) Local sources confirm that they communicated with the junta their intention to stage another sit in, at mid-day on March 18th. As this would coincide with the weekly Ministerial meeting, they were urged by the Minister of Communication not to hold the gathering, and were told that the Minister was doing everything he could to free Abbass. In addition, local staff relayed rumors that General Aziz has promised to unblock the Taqadoumy site. With these carrots in the pocket, journalists are said to have called off the protest. Comment: This reaction could be a deja-vu fear of the December 2008 chaotic anti-Gaza protests which quickly became out of the junta's control. At first evidence of

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public support the protests soon became a thorn in the junta's side.

¶10. (SBU) Abbass was reportedly released the afternoon of March 18 as promised and the two main internet providers have reportedly been instructed to unblock the Taqadoumy website.

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COMMENT  
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¶11. (C) Abbass' arrest was not be long or violent but was likely designed to send a message to journalists and the FNDD leadership. This message is that anti-coup rhetoric will not be tolerated in advance of June elections. The hope is that journalists will remain quiescent in coming next weeks and allow the farce of democratic elections unfold without too much noise. Abbass is likely seen as a puppet at the hands of a larger more powerful lobby; his arrest was a means to find real source behind his articles. (Note: Taqadoumy is affiliated with the Conscience and Resistance socialist movement purportedly sustained by French backing.) Another element at play is the generational clash between a savvy web youth culture, prone to blogging and facebooking their political woes, and an elder political elite tied to traditional means of communication and impervious to change. This series of incidents does not bode well for the future of press liberty in the weeks leading up to the election. Last week's visit from Libyan mediator Colonel Qadhafi breathed fresh air and inspired hope in a busy press corps. This week's events, in the wake of his departure, led to a sharp let down in an already downtrodden press corps. Without Libyan mediation efforts to buoy them, and with an increased crackdown on websites and journalists, the situation could escalate.

¶12. (C) The use of cyber-media such as Taqadoumy has been a significant factor in the post-coup environment. Despite the

regime's near iron control on the official radio and television outlets, Tagadoumy, CRIDEM and other web-sites get the word out quickly (if not always accurately). The written press has remained remarkably free following the coup but it only reaches a small elite element of Mauritanian society. The regime has some tech-savvy adherents, but generally thinks in old-style PRAVDA-like control of media and events. The cyber-media is tough for them to control.

HANKINS